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The Wright Brothers, Aviators

In a letter received recently from a member of her family, Miss Mary H. Krout was informed that Mr. Wilbur Wright had been presented to the Queen of Italy after his recent success in France, and had received very distinguished honors at the Italian court. It will be recalled that the Italian Princes of the reigning house are eminently scientific men, the Duke of Abruzzi being an intrepid explorer.

It was also stated in the same letter that the city of Dayton will give the now famous brothers a grand reception upon their return to Dayton, which, by the way, is not their native town, both brothers having been born in Indiana. As was mentioned some time ago in the Advertiser, the Wright brothers have not had the usual experience of inventors in contending with poverty, their father being a man of abundant means, and they themselves practical business men, as has been shown, notwithstanding their absorbing scientific study.

In The World's Work for October, Frederick Todd has given a most intelligent and appreciative account of their experiments, exploding a good many of the silly stories that have been circulated about the two inventors and their work. He said:

"One morning in the summer I pushed open the front door of the little two-story store building on West Third street and came upon a big structure of white canvas, aluminum, painted wood, and thick, heavy wires—part of the aeroplane of the Messrs. Wright. There had been much said to me about the secrecy of the two young men in Dayton; but nobody was in sight. Stepping noisily about did not bring anybody. So I went to a side door, from which I saw an elderly gentleman go, and there met Mr. Orville Wright, who had invited me by letter to come any evening after six and talk about flying, his time being taken up with work on the government flying machine during work hours. I told him that I had called just for a moment to make an engagement. 'All right,' he said, 'come up to my house at seven.'"

"And then he took me first to look at the machine I had seen, and, afterward, in the little office upstairs, talked for three hours about experiments on aerodynamics.

"I had gone to Dayton with the idea that Mr. Wright and his brother were two skilful mechanics, who had got a little skilful scientific information from Mr. Chanute, and had then blundered ahead to a kind of success by grace of mechanical expertness got in manufacturing bicycles. But Mr. Wright told me about the painstaking and highly scientific experiments his brother and he conducted. . . . He showed me some of the apparatus—little curved pieces of brass of different sizes and shapes—which they put into a delicate balance in a long tube through which steady currents of air are blown, changing angles and speeds of air, noting everything down and then studying the mass of figures. They perfected their apparatus till it gave them identical results as often as they repeated an experiment (a thing that pioneer experimenters did not succeed in doing), and learned so much from comparing figures that they can now plot the shape of a surface to do something they want and, after testing it, find that it does exactly what they designed.

"Many of the European scientists who have written thick books about how air acts, have reasoned it all out in advance with equations containing plenty of Greek letters, assuming that the air acts just as the fluid water does. The unassuming brothers in Dayton first found out how the air really acts by experimental apparatus. They have satisfied themselves that air behaves differently from water, having no cohesion. Their actual tests with objects have convinced them of some astonishingly curious things that they give an inkling of in confidence, but are not yet ready to make public."

Commenting their observations, Mr. Todd remarked:

"The Wright brothers, studying soaring flight, have satisfied themselves that most sharp gusts are little whirlwinds, funnel-shaped and leaning atop the way they are going; miniature tornadoes, probably set awheel by the tipping over of a structure of air when a light, warm layer next the earth has slowly lifted a heavy cold mass, and balance is suddenly lost."

This glimpse of their home life given by the writer is not only interesting but accurate:

"We talked again at the Wright home," he continues, "on Hawthorne street, in the evening. There, in a charming home circle, of which the two brother inventors are a part, I saw the culture that no doubt made a good foundation for their work. Their father, a clergyman, prominent in church administration, joined with interest in our conversation. Mr. Orville Wright showed as much interest in a local tangle of public school politics, in Mr. Taft's campaign and in the national issues, as he did in the progress of aviation. Then he told me an interesting story of their dealings with foreign governments, denying the stories about exorbitant demands made by them, narrated how some foreign customs officers, with busy patriotism, took their flying machine apart and made complete measurements, and how Mr. Wilbur Wright's flight in France was delayed because his workmen had failed to ship a box of little bolts, which the French hardware shops could not come near duplicating. When we got to the description of his flights, he showed me a complete record in splendid photographs of their trials with gliders and motor-driven machines as they progressed."

Reverting to the charges of secrecy, Mr. Wright gave this account, taking a tilt at the enterprising fellow journalist who always delights in giving a great air of difficulty and mystery to his achievements in behalf of his newspaper:

"They have called us secretive," Mr. Wright began, with a smile. 'We have made many practice flights out at Simms [a village near Dayton], and often we had people stop in wagons and automobiles to watch us. Then we published what we were doing in aeronautical journals, and nearly everything that we had was on record at the Patent Office. Of course, there were curious men that we did not care to have watch us too closely, and when we suspected that experts were on hand we stopped flying. It costs too much to be continually patenting things as we try them out."

"But we never cared about the general public. We invited the local newspapers to watch us, asking only that cameras be barred. We got off for a long time without much notice, because the public did not seem to know the difference between dirigible balloons and aeroplanes. They were both called airships. And with Santos Dumont staying up for half an hour in his balloon and two young bicycle makers in Dayton only a few minutes, the home news didn't attract. And even when we went down to Kitty Hawk and the newspapers got after us, we did not refuse to fly because the reporters were to be sent to us. They never came. They took it for granted and watched us from trees. We knew they were there, for we saw them."

Of their subsequent improvements, Mr. Wright said:

"Our first work, with gliders, showed us only the principles of support and balancing. We learned about shaping the planes and then, for the first time, we put the thick front rib on our wings. . . . We learned something about balancing, and in rivalry with the buzzards we tried soaring. Our wings

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proved better than theirs. We could soar on lighter upper currents on the hills than they. But we have found since that the power-driven machine is entirely different from the glider. We had to unlearn some of the skill we had acquired in gliding after we began to fly. We had to unlearn about as much as we had learned. Gliders will not be used in learning to fly the perfected machine. But we may some time build a glider with the right curves for soaring as a sport."

The Wright brothers are an interesting example of the force of heredity. Their great-grandfather, who was also the great-grandfather of Miss Krout on the maternal side, was a man named Reeder, of English Quaker descent. He spent a large part of his fortune in experimenting with the unsolvable problem of perpetual motion, a mania shared by some of his sons.

In the fourth generation, exemplified in the Wright brothers, the taste for weird mechanics was developed in the form of experiments in aeronautics. Their first crude flying machines, some years ago, were not more impracticable and visionary to the public mind than the fruitless labors of their ancestor.

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